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Asceticism & the Church's Mission According to Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Macrina*

In *Life of Macrina*, Gregory of Nyssa recounts the life of his older sister, an ascetic who plays a critical role in the spiritual formation of two of the three (himself included) 4th century church leaders traditionally known as "the Great Cappadocians." Their collective impact on the Church's mission is inestimable given their contribution to the formulation of Trinitarian doctrine as affirmed at the Council of Constantinople in 381. In this brief essay, I examine how Macrina's ascetic influence on Basil the Great and his brother was ultimately instrumental to this theologically-foundational endeavor, of which the Church is eternally indebted to this day.

We see Macrina's spiritual influence on Basil, in a shorthand account where Gregory of Nyssa describes his brother as being "puffed up beyond measure with the pride of oratory."¹ Without details, we are told that Macrina took this brother by the "hand and with such speed, [drew] him toward the mark of philosophy [ascetic practices] that he forsook the glories of this world,"² leading to the renunciation of property and other entitlements in pursuit of God's purposes. After many years of cultivating the monastic life, he would be summoned by the bishop of Caesarea to fortify the Church under the threat of a new Arian emperor, Valens. Although he died just before the Council of Constantinople convened, Basil, "through a vast correspondence and several theological treatises, made a significant contribution to the

¹ *Readings in World Christian History*, ed. John W. Coakley & Andrea Sterk (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 149.

² Ibid.

reaffirmation of Trinitarian doctrine and the definitive rejection of Arianism,”³ as a leader of the Nicene Party.

In a poignant exchange on the days prior to her passing, Macrina labors through severe asthma to offer her brother Gregory, still grieving over their brother’s death, a larger frame with which to accept tragedy. So rooted Macrina was, it would appear, in the reality and presence of God that she was able to dispense wisdom and perspective regarding the “divine purpose concealed in disasters...and the future life, as if inspired by the Holy Spirit.”⁴ In another visit with Macrina, Gregory is reprimanded after he spoke of his troubles in connection with the persecution of Emperor Valens. “Will you not cease to be insensible to the divine blessing? Will you not remedy the ingratitude of your soul? Will you not compare your position with that of your parents?,”⁵ she exhorts. She goes on to admonish him to be grateful for God’s call on his life, “You are renowned in cities and peoples and nations. Churches summon you as an ally and director...Do you fail to recognize the cause of such great blessing?”⁶

Whether wresting Basil free from worldly attachment, or shaking Gregory out of self-pity, it is clear that Macrina’s influence upon these two towering leaders was rooted in a profoundly deep and spiritual place. As Gregory of Nyssa describes about his older sister in the introduction of this short biography, Macrina was “a woman who raised herself by ‘philosophy’ to the greatest height of human virtue.”⁷ Her resolve to live a monastic life was demonstrated early on in her life in two concrete ways, firstly, by committing to celibacy, and secondly, by converting their Annesi family home into a retreat of prayer and contemplation. As Justo

³ Justo Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity, Volume 1, The Early Church to the Reformation* (San Francisco, HarperOne, 2010), 213.

⁴ John Coakley & Andrea Sterk, 152.

⁵ Ibid, 153.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, 147.

Gonzales points out that, “since Basil eventually became the great teacher of monasticism in the Greek-speaking church, and since it was Macrina who awakened his interest in it, it could be said that she was the founder of Greek monasticism.”⁸ And as Church history professor David Komline says, Macrina “is increasingly getting scholarly attention [regarding] the influence she has on the piety and thinking of her brothers...[explaining why] she is often accounted among the Great Cappadocians.”⁹ To summarize, one can draw direct lines between Macrina’s asceticism and her brothers’ contribution to the pivotal, Nicene-Constantinopolitan work in the history of the Church’s mission.

Life of Macrina contains within its pages important lessons for the Church’s mission today. For one, it speaks of the cost of discipleship, that is, that following Christ in the world involves purposeful and determined renunciation of things that would distract us. Secondly, it substantiates the link between spiritual practices (e.g. prayer, meditation, and devotional life) and sound perspective which leads to persevering and joyful service. Lastly, it raises the practical question of spiritual companionship. As servants of the Church, do we each have at least one “Macrina” who will unapologetically speak truth and mentor toward spiritual intimacy and attentiveness to God? For the sake of the Church’s mission, I believe this is a question that must not be taken lightly.

⁸ Justo Gonzales, 210.

⁹ David Komline, “Christ and the Trinity” (lecture, Church History 1, Western Theological Seminary, September 18, 2016)